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January 31, 1970

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger *HK*

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE
INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

SUBJECT: CIA Assessment of Vietnamization

The CIA has produced the attached narrative review of Vietnamization progress and prospects (Tab A). It is based on a study of the views of ARVN commanders, and on an analysis of ARVN performance and the current activities of enemy forces.

The memorandum concludes that the real test of Vietnamization will probably not come until at least the end of 1970, by which time the Communists anticipate a substantial further reduction of US ground forces. Meanwhile, there have been both bright and disappointing spots in the performance of SVN forces. It is clear that the ARVN, especially, still has a considerable way to go in developing both the technical skills and the will to fight necessary to cope with a threat of the magnitude currently posed by enemy forces.

Some of the specific points made in the CIA assessment are as follows:

-- There is sound evidence that the territorial forces (regional and popular units) have greatly improved over the past year in all the standard indicators of efficiency, most notably their KIA rate. It must be recognized, however, that the improvement is based on a very poor performance base originally, and that further gains will come harder.

-- By contrast, the performance of the ARVN regular units has declined in the past year when measured in statistical terms such as the KIA rate, combat contacts, etc. This is not so much a reflection of deterioration in ARVN capabilities as an indication of a shift in enemy tactics toward initiatives primarily aimed at the territorial forces.

-- Late last year, surveys of the views of top ARVN leaders on Vietnamization found most of them optimistic about the future. Recently, however, a similar survey revealed a growing pessimism with concern

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centered around the fear of an overly hasty American withdrawal which would leave the ARVN badly vulnerable to renewed Communist main force pressures. It is worth noting that the pessimism has increased as the ARVN combat load has risen.

Progress by Corps

I Corps. ARVN units, among the GVN's best, have continued to hold the populated coastal sectors effectively. Communist main force units were largely driven out of these areas by US and GVN forces by early 1969. The Communists have not tried to mount a major new push since then, but do have large forces located in nearby border sanctuaries from which they could quickly intensify pressures along the coast.

II Corps. The first real test of Vietnamization occurred here in the summer when the Communists laid siege to two Vietnamese border strong-points. The results were inconclusive. Some ARVN units performed well, and the Communists suffered heavy losses, largely as a result of allied air power. However, they never really tried to take the camps, and one ARVN regiment was badly demoralized as a result of its combat experience. Along the coast, the ARVN has been holding its own, but its leaders fear the withdrawal of any American ground units from this sector in the foreseeable future.

III Corps. ARVN units here have traditionally been among the weakest in the country, and the US program has concentrated on raising their effectiveness. As a result some gains have been noted in two of the divisions, but the division closest to the enemy along the Cambodian border is still performing very poorly and could not hold its own against the Communist units arrayed in the area, if left without substantial US ground support.

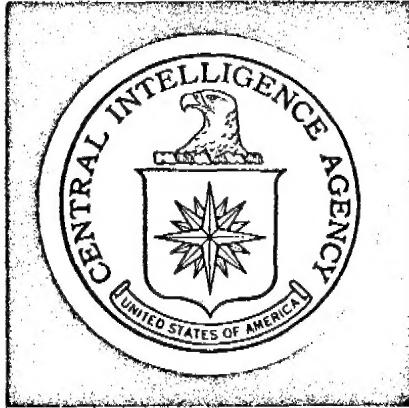
IV Corps. The ARVN division which filled in for US ground units withdrawn in the upper Delta has so far not performed very effectively, and the enemy has begun to rebuild his position. The recent replacement of the division commander could help remedy this situation, however. The picture is brighter in the lower Delta where one of the ARVN divisions is considered as good as any GVN unit in the country. However, the Communists clearly intend to mount a strong test of Vietnamization in the Delta and have moved in several regiments in the western provinces to strengthen their position. ARVN performances against them sofar has been mixed.

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DIRECTORATE OF
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Intelligence Memorandum

Vietnamization: Progress and Prospects

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
23 January 1970

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Vietnamization: Progress and Prospects

General Considerations

More favorable conditions for turning over additional war responsibilities to the South Vietnamese became evident soon after the 1968 Tet and May offensives. Many of the larger regular enemy units withdrew into North Vietnam or across the Laotian and Cambodian borders, where they could no longer effectively support local Viet Cong forces and the Communists' political apparatus.

Allied forces gradually regained the initiative in the war as US and South Vietnamese units moved out into the countryside. They were followed by government territorial security forces (Regional and Popular Force troops) and pacification teams. The government made substantial progress in extending its control over the population in the countryside, and it recruited new personnel and trained them for duty in the various branches of the armed forces during the latter half of 1968 and 1969.

The Communists resumed larger scale military attacks in their spring campaign early in 1969, stalling the government pacification program in several important areas and setting it back in a few provinces. Since then, enemy activity has

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South Vietnamese Army Areas of Responsibility



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again fallen off sharply and has consisted mainly of "highpoints" of harassing attacks and limited campaigns against South Vietnamese outposts along the Cambodian border and in the Mekong Delta.

The performance of South Vietnamese forces in these very limited combat tests shows that they still have a considerable distance to go in developing both technical skills and aggressive combat attitudes. Although some South Vietnamese units acquitted themselves well in 1969, US advisers report that other units once again displayed the perennial weaknesses of poor leadership and lack of aggressiveness. Most government units, however, simply have not been put to the acid test.

If the Communists intend to challenge South Vietnamese forces seriously in 1970 in an attempt to reverse the military and pacification momentum built up over the past year and a half, they will have to commit more forces than they did in their spring campaign of 1969. In order to roll back the pacification program significantly in the near future, for example, they probably would have to bring enough large Communist units into action to force allied units back from the countryside into defensive positions around bases and towns. This would have to happen in widespread areas before the Communists could hope to bring effective support to local Viet Cong troops and political cadres that have been hard pressed and unable to operate effectively in many rural areas in recent months.

Despite the Communists' need to provide more protection for their local elements almost everywhere it is by no means clear that they intend to step up military activity across the board in 1970. The Communists may be hoping that some impressive battlefield successes over selected South Vietnamese units, say in some parts of the Mekong Delta or in northern I Corps, might have far-reaching psychological consequences. It appears likely, however, that the Communists deem it wise to hold much of their strength in reserve until more US troops have been withdrawn, probably in the belief that there will be better opportunities later to challenge the South Vietnamese head-on. In the meantime, the

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enemy probably assumes that shellings, sapper, and terrorist attacks and occasional main force engagements will keep South Vietnamese forces on edge, remind the population that the Communists are still to be reckoned with and provide some measure of protection for their own local assets. If the Communists really keep their military activity within limited bounds for the time being, South Vietnamese armed forces probably have a good chance of making additional progress in developing their strength and in further improving the government's population control.

In the longer term, however, Hanoi probably regards the Vietnamization program as a fundamental threat that must be challenged forcefully. The Communists might be ready for a major push a year from now during the annual winter-spring campaign period of 1970-71. At the withdrawal rate of the past few months the US will have pulled out some 200,000 troops by the end of 1970. If the Communists were willing by then to put the manpower resources into such an effort, they might be able to put South Vietnamese and other allied forces still in the country on the defensive and at least begin to regain a better grip on part of the rural population. The enemy's chances of success in such a venture would depend largely on how much South Vietnamese forces have developed and how well government pacification efforts have succeeded in the meantime.

The number of variables involved makes it extremely difficult to predict the outcome of a radical enemy test of Vietnamization. Much will depend on enemy intentions and strengths at the time such a test occurs and on the capabilities that South Vietnamese forces have developed by that time. Some important variables in the situation such as political moods, tempers, and climate, are inherently difficult to measure. If major segments of South Vietnam's rural population and the personnel of government organizations, military and civil, think Vietnamization is going to work--i.e., that the Communists' apparatus is going to deteriorate and the government's position continue to improve--then they would support the program. Conversely, a widespread opinion among the same

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segments of the Vietnamese populace that the Communists are eventually bound to win, and the GVN to fail, would lead to a general apathy toward Vietnamization and the failure of the program. Thus the pattern of actual events develops dynamics of its own that can materially affect the eventual outcome of the struggle. If the Communists opt to deter launching a major countereffort against Vietnamization for another year or so, they run the distinct risk of playing Casey at the bat. The longer Vietnamization or pacification appears to be working--and the prolonged absence of serious Communist counter pressure certainly contributes to the government's chances for success--the more likely people are to think it is working.

For all of these reasons, the present situation is very murky, and its evolution hard to predict. The trend of events over the next six months or so, however, should clarify at least some currently opaque questions and provide a much firmer basis for assessing the future of Vietnamization beyond that time frame.

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The Territorial Forces

1. The most significant change within the South Vietnamese armed forces during the two years since the 1968 Tet Offensive has been the development of the Regional Forces (RF) and Popular Force (PF) units. These organizations defend the hamlets, villages, and provincial towns scattered throughout the country. The number of RF companies has increased by about 60 percent since early 1968, and there are now 25 percent more PF platoons. During the same period the number of regular South Vietnamese battalions increased by some 10 percent. Of the million or so South Vietnamese now bearing arms on behalf of the Saigon government, nearly half are serving in RF and PF units.
2. These territorial forces have assumed a much greater share of the fighting in the past year, largely because of the changed character of the war. This in turn has given them better opportunities than regular South Vietnamese battalions to demonstrate improved performance. RF and PF troops have shown significant improvements in most of the standard indicators of military performance, such as kill ratios, weapons captured, and number of operations conducted. Both the expansion and improvement in performance have helped substantially in the government's pacification program. Territorial security judgments, based on the Hamlet Evaluation System, show an increase in "relatively secure" population from 60 percent in March 1968 following the Tet Offensive to more than 90 percent today. Even allowing for the inadequacies of such statistical measures, these figures suggest how much progress has been made in extending Saigon's writ into the countryside.
3. US advisers report that the best RF and PF units are located in the I and IV Corps areas. Those in III Corps are considered average, and those in the II Corps area are reasonably active but have poor performance ratings.

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The Regulars

4. While the standard indicators of military performance show that territorial security forces have been expanding and improving their performance since the 1968 Tet period, these same indicators point to declines instead of improvements for South Vietnamese regular units. For example, the rate at which South Vietnamese regular units killed enemy troops and captured weapons dropped by about 20 percent in 1969, as compared with the period in 1968 following Tet. These declines in the standard indicators, however, probably reflect changes in both Communist and allied tactics more than they do any actual deterioration in the performance of South Vietnamese regulars. The Communists have de-emphasized large-scale infantry assaults since the first half of 1968, which means that South Vietnamese regulars have had many fewer opportunities to fight defensive battles from fortified positions--situations that have in the past cost the Communists heavily in manpower and weapons and have usually resulted in a kill ratio very favorable to the allies. Instead, the enemy has engaged RF and PF units more often, maintaining a high level of smaller scale but widespread attacks throughout the countryside.

5. One of the best measures of the performance of South Vietnamese Army troops is provided by US advisers who make quarterly evaluations of the units to which they are attached. During the 18-month period from January 1968 through June 1969, the US ratings of the operational effectiveness of all South Vietnamese infantry battalions showed no significant over-all improvement. The number of battalions with improved scores in a given reporting period was usually offset by an equal number of battalions receiving lower ratings. In the third quarter of 1969, however, the over-all operational effectiveness rating showed some gain for the first time since the current rating system was established in early 1968. The advisers judged that 85 battalions had demonstrated greater competence and that only 46 had regressed during the period.

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6. In addition to their regular army forces, the South Vietnamese have about a division each of elite Marine, Airborne, and Ranger units that consistently turn in a good performance. The Marine and Airborne troops have operated mainly in III Corps, although some battalions have been attached to mobile task forces in the delta. Several battalions of Rangers operate permanently in each of the corps areas.

Leadership Problems

7. US advisers report many areas in which South Vietnamese officers continue to exhibit serious shortcomings. Most of them cite deficiencies in leadership, pointing to the failure of South Vietnamese officers and troops to be aggressive in seeking out and destroying the Communists. Although the leadership problem has been recognized for years, improvements have been very gradual and difficult to discern. There is little good evidence that leadership in the South Vietnamese Army has improved very much over the past two years.

8. US adviser reports indicate that South Vietnamese officers in the higher ranks owe their promotions more to their political sense and personal contacts than to their records as commanders of combat units. Few middle and lower level officers seek combat commands. There is little incentive for them to do so, because promotions come more quickly to those in rear area staff positions. Although the South Vietnamese Army's table of organization calls for infantry battalion commanders to hold the rank of lieutenant colonel, in practice only a small percentage rank that high, and most are captains and majors. The latest available US advisory report, covering the third quarter of 1969, indicates that the number of infantry battalions with captains as commanders was increasing rather than being reduced.

9. The South Vietnamese officer corps is bottom-heavy with too many junior officers and not enough officers in the middle and senior grades. This situation is due in part to the expansion of the armed forces over the past two years, during which there seems to have been a failure in spotting and

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moving the best commanders up the line. The South Vietnamese Government denies itself access to vast resources of leadership because of its restricted standards of class and education. In the selection of officer candidates, for example, the government generally does not look beyond the very small percentage of young men from the bourgeois urban class who have completed secondary education. The vast majority of youths, who come from peasant families in the countryside, are seldom considered for leadership positions, either in the military or the civil service, and consequently this large source of potential drive and talent is left for the most part to be exploited by the Communists. President Thieu's replacement of several division commanders late last summer and, more recently, his assignment of new commanders in the delta and II Corps may mean that some progress is finally being made in dealing with this long-standing leadership problem, at least in the senior echelons.

10. The needs of the Vietnamization program probably provided the main impetus for President Thieu's recent shake-up of military command positions. A desire for better leadership rather than political motives seems to lie behind the few changes announced so far. Most of the new commanders are experienced line officers considered aggressive and dynamic, as well as loyal to the President.

11. Poor leadership probably explains in large part why there are about 30 regular South Vietnamese battalions that for more than a year have consistently received low ratings on their aggressiveness from US advisers. The army's shortcomings are also compounded by a lack of leadership in the areas of staff work, training, and morale. US advisers in position to judge believe that about 20 percent of the South Vietnamese intelligence and operations staffs at both regimental and divisional level are operating ineffectively. Advisers also say that about half of the combat training conducted by the South Vietnamese is ineffective or marginal. In addition, poor leadership has adverse effects on morale and the number of desertions, which yearly drain away nearly one third of the manpower in the regular combat maneuver battalions.

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12. Another factor contributing to morale problems and the high desertion rate among South Vietnamese enlisted men is the poor economic conditions in which many of the soldiers and their families live. A survey in the fall of 1969 found that nearly 30 percent of the US advisers rated the housing provided for South Vietnamese Army families as worse than that provided for Viet Cong fighters in the Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) programs. Stock shortages still appear to be reducing the effectiveness of the commissary system. A recent US Embassy survey indicated that soldiers were still bitter about last November's austerity tax, which raised prices and significantly worsened living conditions, especially for enlisted men.

Morale and Attitudes

13. Most South Vietnamese officers interviewed by US officials late last year expressed guarded optimism about the prospects of Vietnamization in their immediate areas of responsibility. In general, they said that they would be able to keep the Communists at bay if significant American artillery, air, and logistics support continued. More recently, however, a similar survey found a few senior officers quite pessimistic about war prospects.

14. The new commander of the South Vietnamese 5th Division north of Saigon provides an extreme example of this pessimism. He doubts that his unit can take over total defense responsibilities from the US 1st Infantry Division, which is due to withdraw from the country this spring, and he predicts that if current plans are carried out, the situation will soon become as bleak as it was in the early 1960s, except that this time there would be no hope of rescue.

15. Similar reservations about Vietnamization were expressed by the commander of the 22nd Division, who said that the withdrawal of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade from Binh Dinh Province this year would be highly undesirable. The general commanding the

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special defense zone along the Cambodian border in the delta gave an extremely pessimistic account of his situation late last year when increasing numbers of North Vietnamese troops were turning up in his area of responsibility. This officer was recently relieved of his delta command and put in charge of South Vietnamese Special Forces.

16. In the recent survey, only one South Vietnamese general officer among ten expressed the belief that the war would "fade away." Most of the generals believe that the war will either drag on inconclusively for years--with South Vietnamese units strong enough to contain Communist attacks but not to destroy them--or that the enemy will wait until US forces have pulled out and then launch large-scale attacks, which the South Vietnamese Army might not be able to withstand. The more confident South Vietnamese generals were found in IV Corps, where South Vietnamese forces have always carried a greater proportion of the combat burden, and in I Corps, where some South Vietnamese units have gone through a number of severe battles and performed well.

17. A more meaningful assessment of South Vietnamese morale will be possible only after many more units have undergone major combat tests under conditions of diminished US support. A number of South Vietnamese officers, especially the best younger field commanders, believe that their forces will successfully weather these coming tests and that heightened self-pride and nationalism growing out of the confrontations will eventually contribute substantially to South Vietnam's ability to contain the Communists indefinitely.

Progress in I Corps Faces Strong Potential Threat

18. In I Corps, US and South Vietnamese military and pacification forces have been making progress rivaling that seen anywhere else in the country. The allies face a strong threat in the northernmost provinces, however, from the large concentrations of North Vietnamese troops just across the borders. There are sizable North Vietnamese forces along the Laos border just west of the A Shau Valley, and

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additional large units are deployed just north of the Demilitarized Zone.

19. The South Vietnamese commander of I Corps believes that heavy enemy attacks from across those borders might force his units to give ground initially, but he is confident that such thrusts could be contained. Most South Vietnamese officers in the northern provinces, however, do not expect the Communists to launch a massive invasion from Laos or North Vietnam in the near future. They estimate instead that the enemy will continue to rely mainly on smaller scale ground attacks and shellings. They anticipate periodic upsurges of this kind of activity and some damaging sapper and infantry assaults designed mainly for high psychological impact. They believe that the enemy has been hurt seriously in I Corps in recent years and does not want to pay the high cost in casualties that another large-scale sustained offensive campaign early this year would necessarily entail.

20. These South Vietnamese assessments appear to be generally realistic. Available intelligence suggests that the Communists will refrain from overly adventurous attacks in I Corps for the time being. It remains possible, however, that they may decide to use some of the dozen or so regiments positioned nearby to test severely the mettle of the South Vietnamese 1st Division, which has taken over defensive responsibilities below the Demilitarized Zone from the recently departed US 3rd Marine Division.

21. US advisers assigned to the 1st Division have consistently rated it one of the best in the South Vietnamese Army. The division rose to the occasion and fought well during the 1968 Tet offensive, and it has conducted aggressive operations against the reduced enemy threat in northernmost Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces ever since. The South Vietnamese 51st Regiment in the Da Nang area and the 2nd Division in southern I Corps are also rated among the best fighting units in the army by US advisers, which is significant because the latter unit faces an especially tenacious enemy force.

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22. The first allied effort to test the Vietnamization concept took place in the Ben Het campaign in the central highlands in May and June 1969. Early in May it became clear from intelligence reports that two North Vietnamese infantry regiments with supporting artillery were closing in on the outpost at Ben Het in Kontum Province. The main responsibility for defense of this border outpost was turned over to the South Vietnamese 42nd Regiment and an elite Ranger Regiment. Strong units from the US 4th Infantry Division were available nearby in Kontum, but they were not committed to the Ben Het fight.

23. The South Vietnamese relied heavily on US air and artillery strikes to break up the North Vietnamese attack, and the battalions of the Ranger Regiment also moved out aggressively to control key terrain near Ben Het and block enemy avenues of approach. US advisers with the Rangers reported that their performance was outstanding. Advisers with the 42nd Regiment battalions, however, reported that their units were not aggressive while in contact with the encroaching North Vietnamese forces. The desertion rate of this regiment rose from about 19 per thousand in March to nearly 60 per thousand in June during the heaviest fighting. Its kill ratio was cut in half, and US adviser assessments of the regiment's effectiveness and leadership dropped drastically.

24. As it turned out, the North Vietnamese did not make a major assault directly against Ben Het, probably because of the massive allied air strikes. The battle could hardly be judged an unqualified success for either the South Vietnamese or the enemy. The North Vietnamese may, nevertheless, have considered it worthwhile insofar as they wore down and demoralized a large government unit.

25. The same North Vietnamese regiments that fought around Ben Het shifted more than 150 miles to the south and conducted a very similar campaign

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in the Bu Prang - Duc Lap sector of southern II Corps in late October and November. The enemy once again relied mainly on shelling attacks and small probes for more than a month before pulling back into Cambodian sanctuary and returning north toward Kontum Province.

26. The South Vietnamese 23rd Division defending Bu Prang and Duc Lap also relied mainly on air support as the most effective means to counter the enemy drive. There were reports that elements of the 23rd performed more effectively in this campaign than did their counterparts in the 42nd Regiment at Ben Het. Subordinate units of the 23rd reportedly were rotated in and out of the battle area more efficiently, and no single battalion became completely exhausted. The North Vietnamese never mounted a major ground effort to overrun either Bu Prang or Duc Lap, however, and the fighting qualities of the South Vietnamese ground forces were not fully tested. It appears likely, moreover, that the same North Vietnamese regiments that fought at Ben Het and later at Bu Prang - Duc Lap will be ready for another incursion into the highlands within a month or two.

27. The border campaigns in the central highlands in 1969 must, of course, be assessed in the context of the enemy's general de-emphasis of military operations in the II Corps region. Starting in early 1968, soon after the Tet offensive, the Communists pulled several North Vietnamese regiments out of II Corps and sent them southward to operate in III and IV Corps. Additionally, the infiltration of northern replacements during the past two years to II Corps has been lighter than to any other region.

28. Despite the withdrawal of substantial Communist units from II Corps, however, it appears likely that South Vietnamese forces in the region will have to face additional significant combat tests later this year. In addition to the North Vietnamese regiments still ranging along the Cambodian border in the highlands, the North Vietnamese 3rd Division has been moving into position to attack allied forces engaged in the pacification program in Binh Dinh

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Province on the coast. The South Vietnamese 22nd Division and the 173rd Airborne Brigade recently began a major spoiling operation in Binh Dinh aimed at knocking the North Vietnamese 3rd Division off balance. US advisers report that the 22nd Division conducted some good operations in support of pacification in 1969, but that there was a lack of combat aggressiveness in all three of the division's regiments.

III Corps: Not Now Top Enemy Priority Area

enemy

29. The Communist intent to reduce the near-term concentration of effort in the Saigon - III Corps region has been evident since early last summer. The enemy has shifted five regular North Vietnamese regiments from the provinces northwest of the capital to the delta. These redeployments have reduced the basic enemy threat north of Saigon to three divisions, which for the most part have remained in the remote area along the Cambodian border since the conclusion of the 1969 spring offensive.

30. These forces have been playing a role similar to that of the large North Vietnamese troop formations threatening northern I Corps from positions just across the Laotian and North Vietnamese borders. The concentrations along both the I and III corps borders constitute major threats to South Vietnamese forces, territory, and population. Substantial numbers of North Vietnamese replacement packets are now en route to the III Corps, probably meaning that the enemy anticipates significant fighting in the region this year. There is little hard evidence, however, that the Communists intend to commit their III Corps divisions fully in the near future.

31. The three South Vietnamese Army divisions in III Corps have always been among the weakest combat units in the country. During the summer and fall of 1969 the 25th Division operating in Hau Nghia and Long An provinces started to show some improvement, however, after it began to conduct combined operations with US forces. The 18th Division, which operates east of Saigon in one of the least threatened areas in South Vietnam, also began to get better ratings from

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US advisers when a new commander took over in August 1969.

32. A new commander and a large increase in combined operations with US forces during the fall did not produce any appreciable improvement in the 5th Division. The 5th, responsible for the most active war sector in northern III Corps, including Phuoc Long and Binh Long provinces, continued to be rated as one of the least effective South Vietnamese divisions during the third quarter of 1969. Five of the 12 US advisers to the infantry battalions in the 5th Division reported that their units were not aggressive when in contact with the enemy. On balance, it appears that the South Vietnamese still have a long way to go in developing fighting units capable of containing even the reduced enemy main force threat in the outer reaches of III Corps.

33. Closer in to Saigon, the Communists' main and local force units have deteriorated under heavy government pressure. These units are constantly short of replacements, munitions, and food. Intelligence indicates that enemy sappers and terrorists will continue to try to penetrate the Saigon area--and some will probably get through--but the Communists seem to have relatively modest ambitions for operations in the capital area, largely because the strong and effective allied defenses are too formidable for their reduced capabilities. Government security services have had considerable success even against sapper operations, harassing, penetrating, and rounding up Communist intelligence, special action, and terrorist units.

IV Corps: Key Test Shaping Up in the Delta

34. Recent developments in the Mekong Delta suggest that this region may be the scene of some of the most significant action between South Vietnamese and Communist forces in the coming months. Beginning with the spring of 1969, the Communists--for the first time in the war--sent North Vietnamese regulars into the area, which used to be their primary source of in-country manpower. These reinforcements are substantial, now totaling five regular regiments, at

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least one divisional headquarters, and probably several thousand replacement troops either in the region or nearby in Cambodia. The Communists are unmistakably bent on trying to regain greater access to the large human and material resources of the delta, over which the government has been steadily increasing its control since mid-1968. But how they intend to proceed is still quite unclear.

35. The new North Vietnamese troops in the area might be used in a try for quick gains, or they might be employed more prudently to bring gradually increasing pressure on government forces. With a few exceptions, the units have been fairly cautious so far, suggesting that they may be settling in for the long haul. The North Vietnamese may, for example, have a primary mission of establishing and consolidating secure bases in peripheral areas, such as the U Minh Forest and the Seven Mountains, from which they could support hard-pressed local forces and try to regain control over populated areas. There have been a number of reports suggesting that another enemy objective in this area is to build up a formidable position that would be advantageous in the event of a cease-fire.

36. The size of the enemy buildup in the delta, however, suggests that the Communists will be on the lookout for opportunities to maul some of the larger South Vietnamese military units, or possibly to overrun or significantly damage a provincial capital. Some sources claim that the enemy plans to commit two regiments to an attack against My Tho, the principal city in the upper delta, where US troops once operated. The present position of units also suggests a threat to Chau Doc city, the capital of Chau Doc Province. A number of other cities have also been mentioned as targets for large-scale attacks. The Communists may believe that a succession of impressive attacks in the delta in the next few months would have great psychological impact and be interpreted by many as evidence that Vietnamization is unrealistic.

37. The South Vietnamese Army divisions in the delta region are considered by US advisers to be

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about average. The 7th Division's area of responsibility in the upper delta--Dinh Tuong, Kien Hoa, and Go Cong provinces--is a difficult one. These provinces are among the most densely populated in the country and also the least pacified, although considerable progress has been made since early 1968. There still is a high density of enemy forces in the upper delta, including many guerrillas. Nearly 100,000 people in Kien Hoa remain under Viet Cong control. Almost 60 percent of the 7th Division's combat deaths are caused by mines and booby traps set out by Communist local forces and sympathizers. US advisers reported that the 7th Division showed some improvement in the third quarter of 1969, after a slight deterioration during the three previous quarters.

38. The 9th Division, based in the central delta, has recently demonstrated increased mobility, detaching battalions to assist both the 7th Division to its north and the 21st Division to the south. The 21st Division, with a large area of responsibility in the southern delta, is probably the best South Vietnamese division in IV Corps, but US advisers reported that its effectiveness declined somewhat over the first three quarters of 1969.

39. The South Vietnamese reaction to the Communist buildup in the delta so far has been spotty. South Vietnamese Army units claim to have kept the enemy's 273rd Regiment bottled up in its U Minh Forest stronghold, but the regiment does not appear to have made any really serious attempt yet to break out. One battalion of the regiment was mauled badly last summer by South Vietnamese forces supported by US helicopter gunships as it was moving from the Cambodian border to the U Minh Forest. The North Vietnamese 18B Regiment has made some forays out of the Seven Mountains base area, causing many civilians to flee and setting back the pacification program in two districts in Chau Doc Province. A battalion of North Vietnam's 88th Regiment also launched an assault against a district town along the Cambodian border, but local government defenders, including Popular Forces, beat back the attack, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy with little help from regular army units.

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40. In Dinh Tuong Province, in the area covered by the South Vietnamese 7th Division, Viet Cong units with new North Vietnamese fillers became more active beginning in November. At that time they attacked and nearly destroyed a government battalion as an effective unit. Pressure against the pacification program also built up gradually in Dinh Tuong and nearby Kien Hoa provinces during November and December as the enemy began operating in larger units.

41. If the North Vietnamese do try for major victories in the delta, it is difficult to predict who will prevail, as neither the South nor the North Vietnamese have had much experience fighting conventional large-unit warfare in the delta terrain. The superior air and artillery firepower support available to the South Vietnamese, if used effectively, should make it extremely hazardous for the North Vietnamese to mass large units for attacks in the open terrain of the delta. The great expansion of the South Vietnamese territorial security forces there during the past two years also puts the government in a favorable position right now. The outcome of the struggle in the delta will depend on how well the South Vietnamese regular battalions stand up to the growing North Vietnamese main-force threat, and how well the Regional and Popular soldiers in the newly pacified areas hold their ground against Viet Cong local forces and guerrillas trying to make a comeback.

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